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Pedagogical and creative perspectives of handwriting, human heritage

ROBERTO TRAVAGLINI

Ricercatore di Pedagogia generale e sociale – Università di Urbino

Corresponding author: roberto.travaglini@uniurb.it

Abstract. In this article we are wondering if nowadays more than ever it is possible to consider as well-founded and emerging a pedagogy of the writing gesture, committed to recognise and support the creativity range of a complete educational process closely connected to certain dynamics that subtend the learning of handwriting, considered a common good and a human heritage. The increasingly widespread tendency to remove this educational significance, replacing the handwriting and its implicit complexity by using virtual technological instruments, apparently represents an unstoppable process, not devoid of pedagogically relevant consequences. Considering the complexity of the subject, the educational and pedagogical methods whose aim is to foster the process of abstraction required from the learning of the writing gesture, have always tried to answer, although in different ways, to the need of supporting handwriting in order to facilitate the individual development of the cognitive and affective dimensions of the child who is learning handwriting: it seems that we are now called, with ever more conviction, not to lose, but actually to strengthen the pedagogical coordinates of an ever more aware education of an important treasure for humankind.

Keywords. Pedagogy, creativity, handwriting, human heritage, writing

1. Can a pedagogy of the writing gesture exist?

To assess if a *pedagogy of the writing gesture* can be considered well-founded and emerging, we need first of all to relate and deal with the present sociocultural structure and the linked prevailing *forma mentis* while relating to the educational-formative process of handwriting, especially nowadays that we are faced with quick and unstoppable changes in the written communication.

We can't overlook, at the beginning, the idea that the experience of learning to write is the effect of a precise socio-anthropological action, the evident signal of a given cultural mark, construable as the precise behavioural and expressive choice of a population in a specific socio-historical environment: this choice depends not only on the type of writing code selected (be it calligraphic or ideographic), but also on the dominant mind-set that fosters the generalized choices of the people who live together in the same community (and who build a certain style of cultural mind-set, whose approximate assumption/premise can't be easily neglected).

The potential construction of a *pedagogy of handwriting* can then become the main reflective instrument of this socio-anthropological process, at least with regard to the

way of thinking and building the methods of the writing's transmission: this is, indeed, a theoretical-educational and didactic-instrumental construct of mediation between the native culture and the individual, who approaches writing with the educational method that exactly answers to the most pregnant motivations of the community in a given anthropological space and time, from which he is deeply influenced.

We can therefore assert, especially from a pedagogical point of view, that the methods to optimise the learning of handwriting tend to be affected by the ongoing sociocultural influences, showing the need to open up to research and experimentation of the methods considered most pedagogically suitable for an education of the writing gesture that takes into account the creative significance of a complete educational process, inevitably linked to certain particularly complex dynamisms, implied in the learning of handwriting.

We need to notice, in fact, that the traditional educational method used in schools to teach how to write is characterised largely – and not always consistent with certain current pedagogical lines – by practical-educational models that are often anachronistic, as mostly denoted by a mechanistic and adultocentric manner and, especially, one-sided: instead of fostering an intrinsic motivation towards the writing, following the times of development and the effective cognitive resources of the child, different for each individual, formal education, not always sufficiently aware of this subject, mostly induces the learner to approach the world of writing by offering him calligraphic models and learning methods which are not always suitable to his actual potentialities and to his deepest biological and psychological motivational urges.

The imitative and standardised learning (the model is shown, the pupil imitates it and then his imitative abilities are evaluated on the basis of general criteria) can't certainly be recognized as a methodological-didactic action necessarily effective and operational for everybody.

Since a long time pedagogists who dealt with the complex process of teaching-learning handwriting (cf., for example, Freinet, 1978; Dottrens, 1969; Piaget e Inhelder, 1976; Trisciuzzi, 2007; Vertecchi, 2016a; 2016b) did nothing but reflect on this subject, broadening it and looking for the most correct ways to optimize such a process, also with solutions not always necessarily converging with each other (cf. Travaglini, 2008).

Handwriting, after all, has always represented and still represents a fundamental first step towards an adequate process of acculturation, and although the writing systems are becoming more and more digitalized, switching from the manual skill to the highly technology-based use of the new sociocultural media more than ever digitalized (on whose pedagogical-educational problems we will focus later), handwriting still is in any case a significant cognitive goal in the first months and years of school life: writing by hand stands as a symbolic instrument of knowledge and cognitive and cultural emancipation, so much that *knowing how to handwrite* constitutes one of the basic pieces of knowledge of primary literacy – as the popular motto says “read, write and multiply”.

Handwriting is estimated as a good which is biologically attributable to the innate potentialities of humankind, a universally shared *common good* to safeguard in the perspective of various reasons whose pedagogical foundation, maybe not always sufficiently discussed, elaborated and adequately defended, seems absolutely undeniable and, today more than ever, emerging (cf., on this subject, Travaglini, 2017), so much that a *cam-*

paign for the right of writing by hand has been launched to face the predominant process of the writing's digitalization both in formal and non-formal contexts of education, a sort of movement in defence of handwriting (in its cursive and ideographic form), with the final aim to see it promoted by UNESCO – maybe in a little utopian way – as *world heritage* (cf. on this subject, for example Merletti, 2016; Garibaldi, 2016).

2. Critical issues of the new generations' written communication

This movement was formed with the intent to slow down, reduce, or, at least, to learn to integrate this more and more massified and by now inescapable tendency, of *digitalization of the writing*, in accordance with the generalized process of virtualization of the communication: the use of digital instruments like computers, tablets or smartphones and their perpetual connection to the network are changing the strategies with which we communicate, read, acquire or transfer information and knowledge.

This process became even more unstoppable with the introduction of the *touch technology* that, as is known, allows us to surf the net or to browse a web page with a simple touch of the fingertip. Thanks to the ease of use of these instruments, their manageability and operational immediacy, digital media quickly became part of our daily life, even of the life of little children, unavoidably changing the habits and most probably also the way of interpreting and relating to the world.

Being widely used, the new media became necessarily *creators of change* in the processes of communication (Riva, 2014, p. 17) – especially the written one – originating at the same time a progressive transformation of the *medium* itself, which acquires new connotative, symbolic and operational properties. The by now daily use of these hi-tech tools has become so essential and necessary that someone suggests to love your own smartphone like yourself, practicing to use it in an active and intelligent way thanks to “Digital Mindfulness”, bringer of happiness and well-being to the “*digital life*” (Subioli, 2017).

Even though most viewpoints tend to converge on some questions about the extent and quality of this new technological advent, some scholars suggest to put a dividing line between the generations born in the shadow of Gutenberg's discovery and the adolescents identified by the American Don Tapscott (2011) as the “Net Generation”, back in 1998. In 2001 Marc Prensky (2013) began to call “digital native” who was born after the start of the digital revolution, and “digital immigrant” who approaches the new media in his adulthood (about this, other distinctions between digital natives are admitted, like *text generation*, *web generation*, *web 2.0 generation* and *touch generation*)¹.

In any case, the unavoidable process of cognitive transformation, to which new generations are exposed, represents an evolutionary break compared to the previous generations, of which one of the most evident consequences is the “directness of technologies” and their “immediate and intuitive” use (Riva, 2014, p.15).

¹ Although some scholars (cf., for example, Rivoltella, 2012) are doubtful about the existence itself of digital natives, due to the lack of sufficient scientific data to support such a sociological construct (Riva, 2014, p.16), Giuseppe Riva suggests, on the other hand, to acknowledge the concept of digital native anyway, but with a different meaning, considering it not only a generational matter and believing, instead, that one can be in so far as the quantity of time dedicated to the use of new technologies. According to this point of view, there can be fifty-year-old digital natives and twenty-year-olds who aren't at all.

Paolo Ferri, an Italian pedagogist who is very close to Prensky's thought, in an interview released in 2012 (cf. Guerra, 2012), reflects on the cultural and socio-anthropological relevance of this process, which is aimed to gradually replace the tactile experience of the communicative and cognitive activity (once consisting only in the contact with books, pens and paper) with other socio-cognitive strategies supported by the virtuality of the new *media*. Such a process ends up altering the traditional relations between theory and practice, body and mind, space and time, bringing to life an evolutionary transformation of the Homo Sapiens (Guerra, 2012, p.17), now characterized by a different way of building and sharing knowledge.

In general, switching from verbal to written culture, besides the occurrence of a different engagement of the sensory organs (sight prevails on hearing), our perception of the space-time changes. Time goes beyond the present, placing the written message in a static space and time; in particular if the *alphabetic schemes* create the perception of a linear flow of time, that keeps the relationship with past and future firm, the new tools of communication, instead, are moving the space-time axis in favour of an elusive and fleeting present: *television and cybernetic schemes* urge us to live a *fragmented* and *quickened* experience of time, and moments for analysis and reflection remain at a subliminal and infra-conscious level (Riva, 2014, p. 69).

Moreover, the new *media* modify the bodily experience and the way to live and experiment the dimension of the concrete space: the *direct mediated action* allows to reach a given goal thanks to the direct, bodily use of a specific instrument (like in the case of handwriting). In this case the instrument is used in an immediate and intuitive manner, and represents an *extension* of the body (Riva, 2014, p. 78) no less than the fingers of the hand engaged in writing, creating the idea of a body's proximity.

On the other hand, the *indirect mediated action* leads to a different competence, extending the body's instrumental influence to the extra-personal space (Riva, 2014, p. 78), with the consequent transformation of the concept of place (and of space), and of mind, that becomes vast more than ever. This is the reason why digital natives don't consider the borders of the place as a delimited and circumscribed physical space: in relation to the seemingly infinite possibilities offered by the *media*, space strays into an unlimited globalized cyberspace.

The consequent deep transformations of cognitive processes and of learning styles, if compared to the ones of the previous generations, stick now to a digital code, and not anymore to an alphabetic one; to a *multitasking learning* that is not linear anymore. Once acquired, this different kind of learning is used without any mediation in the socialization and communication processes, instead of being kept and used to build a critical-reflective thought (Guerra, 2012, p.18).

This new kind of communication conforms well to the current quick and fleeting times of information, as reported by Zygmunt Bauman (2010) because of the presence of a "liquid modernity" in which everything slips away and flows quickly, in which the "tyranny of the ephemeral" dominates and the life of individuals is marked by frantic rhythms that make it a life "in a rush" (Bauman, 2009), little devoted to the knowledge of the self and to the autonomous, creative production of objects (like the handwriting), functional for the development of a reflective and auto-aware thought.

The production of these objects, which are becoming less and less familiar to new generations, is considered as fundamental at an age in which their learning and their

prolonged exercise stimulate and keep active important neurocognitive and motor functions, especially at an evolutionary stage in which the mind-brain is particularly assimilative, plastic and receptive.

The replacement of handwriting with digital writing, which in some places is even proposed as optional to the first – as provided, for example, by the Finnish school legislation (that abrogated the obligation of teaching handwriting, making it optional) – entails the gradual abandon, if not the disappearance of the *medium* writing, although since millennia it accompanies the history of humankind, connotes its filo-genetic evolution and implicates a delicate neuro-muscular exercise indispensable to keep alive and develop specific cerebral centres, which throughout the ages evolved and refined themselves, and which have the specific function of regulating the complex grapho-motorial, symbolic-expressive and communicative activity of the writing.

3. To be creative, to be free, to be united

From a detailed analysis of the western man of the present day, many scholars agree about his spread tendency to remove his own creative dimension, to mechanise his behaviour in advantage of idealized utilitarian and individualistic goals (cf., for example, Lowen, 1985; Lasch, 1985; Bauman, 2010). Also scholars of artistic products, and, in general, graphic products, agree about a presence of a *global dumbing down of the individual and collective expressive manifestations*; this can be observed, in embryo, already from the first stages of life, due to an evident change operating in certain socio-educational and anthropological factors, which concern also the world of written communication.

In front of the irrepressible increase in the digital use of the writing, if we consider *the object writing as a fundamental creative expression* of the individual and of society, the education of the writing gesture should continue to have an irreplaceable basic formative role for new generations too, granted that the concept of *creativity* itself, as many influential scholars affirm, can be made to coincide with life itself and with certain of its spontaneous expressions inherent in human life, like handwriting.

Indeed, according to certain contemporary theoretic lines pertaining in particular to educational and psychological sciences, it is difficult to keep having faith in the belief according to which creativity would be an elitist and aristocratic quality, a heritage for an elite, and not a *potential present in each individual*, a foundation of the Being, fully agreeing with a rather recent meaning of creativity, according to which the creative is who fully becomes himself, who – as Maslow says (1972; 2010) – fulfils himself, led to fulfil his innate potentials, comforted by the lively presence of a “facilitator” educational environment (Rogers, 1975).

At this point, to avoid possible misunderstandings that could cause a conceptual confusion, we will clearly distinguish the strictly creative expression from the artistic one (which presupposes instead a specific innate talent and its exercise and transformation in a concrete ability thanks to the acquisition of a specific technique), creativity can be interpreted, in line with the existentialist vision of Erich Fromm, with the courage and possibility of Being, that is a condition antithetical to the one of who, instead, identifies with the behavioural symbols of the Having, whose current educating society often invites or forces us to join: “our didactic system usually aims to educate people to *have*

knowledge as if it was a possession, in the whole proportioned to the quantity of property or social prestige that individuals will probably have in their future life" (Fromm, 1977, p. 64-65).

The underlying pedagogical wish is that the main educational agencies are *places where creativity is encouraged*, intended as a creativity founded on the *Being*: at school, for example, every student should find the adequate relational conditions to express his/her authentic potentialities in the presence of a teacher who behaves as a "true person", who presents himself "as he is" (Rogers, 1975, p. 132), who puts trust in the student, esteems him and accepts him for who he is, taking towards him a generally emphatic attitude.

This relational style should allow us to put the basis for a "free learning", based on an educational context in which the role of the teacher transforms itself in that of facilitator of the freedom of learning, and thanks to which "significant learning" can increase (Rogers, 1975, p. 148), in conjunction with continuous educational solicitations of natural qualities like independence, autonomy and responsibility towards one's own learning, essential foundations for a free expression of creativity.

The promotion of the "disposition to be reborn every day" (Fromm, 1972, p. 77) is no less important, and it is possible with the *courage* of leading an existence that is different from the majority of the people, with *faith* in what one feels and thinks and "with the demolition of illusions, with the *de-lusion*" (Fromm, 1977, p. 63), therefore knocking down false beliefs.

Creativity can then be an existential condition achievable for everybody, if educating towards the awakening of the innate creative push becomes concrete in an action intended to involve the whole individual existence, to encourage the abandon of indisputable references, to open up to multiple inner potentialities: "positive freedom consists in the spontaneous activity of the total personality" (Fromm, 1978, p. 222).

We can then affirm that *educating to creativity* is the equivalent of "educating to life" (Fromm, 1972, p. 78), as a certain active school was loudly promoting already since the deweyan dictate, a warning that extended itself to the whole progressist-activist movement, particularly lively especially in the years between the nineteenth and twentieth century (cf., for example, Dewey, 1953; Decroly, 1953; Claparède, 1952; Freinet, 1973; Montessori, 1991; for a historiographical approach: Cambi, 2005, pp. 14-36).

According to the psychiatrist Alexander Lowen (1984) every creative experience always involves the *unconscious dimension* of the individual: who lives in a creative way supports his actions through the *acknowledgement of the profound sensations* he feels and which are bound to the *pleasure of living*. In Lowen's opinion there is a very tight connection between pleasure and creativity: it is a *bodily experience* that one lives when movements flow freely, at pace and in harmony with the environment, coinciding with a condition of well-being of a healthy body that works properly.

The acknowledgment is made possible by a level of self-consciousness that is strictly dependent from the intensity with which the person is able to *listen to his/her own body*, intended as an unconscious expression of the self (Lowen, 1984, pp. 205 e 206), and at the same time from the possibility of tying the resulting *sensations* to a diametrically opposite experience, reaching in this way an integrated condition of unity.

Modern society seems obsessed with the search for pleasure and entertainment. This concern is a reaction to violence and to the difficulties of life, and it reveals a real *lack of*

pleasure: it is not necessary to amuse ourselves or to be happy in order to feel pleasure; it can be felt in normal life conditions, because pleasure and its connected creativity are a *way of being*. Modern culture is more oriented toward the Ego (we judge life in terms of success and failure) than toward the body, with the result that power (the ability to control the environment) has become the primary value, while pleasure has been confined to be a secondary value, even if the Self has an important role in pleasure, but only when it is identified with the body: it is necessary, then, to restore the unity of the personality, relieving the body from chronic muscular tensions that block its mobility and limit its respiration.

When an experience is “polarized” (Lowen, 1984, p. 208), it allows the subject to reach not a simple awareness, but the *self-awareness*, which includes the awareness of the “self in relation to the external world, therefore, both of the self and of the external world” (Lowen, 1984, p. 208). The compresence of solicitations which come both from the Self, expressed through the conscious action, and from the body, present in the reactions dictated by the unconscious, generates a push towards possible antithetic paths, that usually cause tension and conflict and that the creative individual (who is the “normalized” individual: Tsuda, 2003), instead, is capable of managing elastically without losing the unitarian dimension of existence, thanks to the presence of a *vital energy* lived as the “power of cohesiveness of the organism” (Lowen, 1984, p. 209).

When the child learns to write it lives such an internal *querelle*: the educational environment should stimulate more than ever its natural inclination to have a spontaneous creative attitude to merge harmoniously both the pushes coming from internal drives, with its arising personality features, and the calligraphic rules coming from the external environment, which require the control of the gesture and a more or less rigorous acceptance of the calligraphic standards dictated by the educational environment.

So, in the creative living takes place an integration between the antithetical parts of the self, an union between the different parts of the Being, like between body and mind, outside and inside, the self and the experiential object: the individual, acting in a creative way, enters a sort of transactional stream of consciousness with the object of experience underway (Dewey and Bentley, 1974), ending every duality. He puts himself in the condition of living an “optimal experience”- as M. Csikszentmihalyi (1988; 1997) says – remarkable also when the individual is deeply motivated to fully commit himself in the building of handwriting.

If the writing self lets himself be absorbed totally by the act of writing by hand (which usually happens when one is completely focused on writing), the individual can live and experience of stream with the instruments of the writing act and, at the same time, with the product itself of the writing action, the writing: in this *process of creative fusion with the graphic matter*, the writers connects himself both to the manifest content of the script (the text) and to the morphologic structure of the graphemic parts, transforming the rough graphic matter in a unique and original writing object (every handwriting, once the gesture becomes automatic, is different for each person and has structural distinctive traits attributable to the way of being of who created it). In this way the writer transforms the codified calligraphic matter (the model taught) into a renovated graphic substance, like clay moulded by the artist.

The individual who, thanks to the presence of a healthy educational environment, with time automatizes the writing gestures in an adequate way and who then doesn't

experience particular frictions between his soul and the social rules, tends to live, as a consequence, the natural graphic-creative process in an harmonious and pleasant way. We can indeed come to the conclusion that, in order that the traits of the letters produced with a pen prove a *healthy and satisfactory communicative interaction* with the rest of the world and, before that, with ourselves, it is necessary not only a continuous training, but also the presence of a specific educational environment, of a cultural terrain and, consequently, of a calligraphic terrain, that are “creativogenic” (reporting here a typical expression of Silvano Arieti, 1979) and then suitable for building personalized writing gestures, which reveal a creative approach to life.

4. The complexity of handwriting

We are wondering at this point, once detected some reading parameters of creativity (intended here as a natural and desirable process of self-fulfilment), if the virtual estrangement of digital writing from the material and “tangible” places of pen and paper could not increasingly detach the individual and its existential and neurocognitive inner workings from some substantial foundations of the creative dimension.

We know well how the process of building handwriting is complex. The abilities required to the child to begin the learning of writing are various and concern specific phonologic, neuro-motor, perceptive-visual and spatial areas (Marnati De Mattei e Bruni, 2008, pp. 25 e 26). The child must be able to:

divide the word in single *phonemes* in an orderly way, in order to then “handle” the sentence starting from the letters. The phonologic competence of oral language will be then integrated with grammar, syntactic, orthographic and lexical rules.

Memorize the connection between the sound (phoneme) and the letter (grapheme). This implies the necessity of learning to distinguish one shape from another, complete the perception of the shape, even if it doesn’t appear entirely, and finally to respect intuitively the spatial proportions.

Reproduce, at a motor level, the different letters and their multiple representations (uppercase, lowercase, block capitals, cursive, etc.). The writing gestures consists of harmonious, precise and gradual movements that involve not only the hand, but also the activity of the wrist, of the arm and of the shoulder. The features and qualities of the movement depend on various factors, like the child’s level of growth, so that age affects its ability of accomplishing specific procedures and the possibility to recognise the references coming from the environment, which operate as a self-regulation system of the movement.

Position in space (line), in a correct way, letters and words, and manage to follow the rules required by the writing system about the proportion in the making of the letter, the connection between letters and words, proving to know how to organise the use of space, also with reference to the entire graphic space (sheet). This seems to require an adequate comprehension of the topological parameters and of the rules demanded by the language code.

The complexity of the competences needed for the production of the graphic gesture underlines the remarkable educational extent of the requests made by the school system that, as Piaget suggests, must always take account of the general and individual peculiari-

ties of the child's growth, whose cognitive structures evolve at different paces, due to the many factors that determine them, related to the physical-perceptive, operative (logical-mathematical), social and cultural and equilibration experiences (Filograsso, 1974, p. 76).

Moreover, it would be pedagogically relevant to interpret the writing gesture as a competence in continuation of the graphic experiences of the early and middle childhood, that specify themselves in the *scribble* and in the *spontaneous drawing* (Travaglini, 2016). The evolution of the drawing, as Lowenfeld and Luquet (1967) and Piaget himself (with Inhelder, 1976) help us to understand better, represents a complex connection between the cognitive dimensions and the mental and affective forms (Filograsso, 1974, p.243), making of the graphic mark a representation not only of the creative expression of the subject, but also of its progressive adhesion, through an internalisation activity, to the rules of the external world, marked by the switch from a simple topologic representation of the single elements, implying relations of proximity, sequence, separation, inclusion and inner reality (cf. Piaget and Inhelder, 1976, p. 54), to the representation regulated by the projective rules and Euclidean relations (Filograsso, 1974, p. 244; Travaglini, 2016, p. 90).

According to Piaget (agreeing with Luquet, 1969), the drawing is not a direct expression of how reality is perceived, but of its representation or conceptualisation, that follows the maturation of the cognitive structures: *intellectual realism* doesn't originate as much from a scarce dexterity in the use of graphic instruments, but rather from the stage of development of the operating structures, which seem to further change from the age of seven or eight, a stage in which the child approaches *visual realism*, proving to be able to build a graphic perspective that is more and more close to the adult way to conceive the world.

When the child begins to learn how to build on the paper the single graphemic structures (in conjunction with the development of the spontaneous drawing), its mind easily lives a paradox derived from the divergence between the present level of its mental schemes, still incapable of building a formal thought, and the instead conceptual reality/nature of the language's written composition, that requires a logical process of cognitive abstraction: let's take as an example the written word "dog", whose single graphemic images, even seen as a whole, don't represent a real dog, they don't even remotely evoke it.

Between the written trace left by the child on the paper and its equivalent linguistic concept we can't observe the correspondence that, on the contrary, occurs between the graphic construction (the real object illustrated) and the cognitive one of the drawing (the image created in one's mind). The paradox is less present in ideographic writings, in which the link between the graphic and the mental image is more concrete and alive. This conflict, typical especially of the alphabetic writing, could make the process of learning of the writing more difficult, because unbound from the child's direct experience, which, mobilising the emotional condition, is usually a strong motivational activator.

An empiric research led in the seventies of the last century by Emilia Ferreiro and Anna Teberosky, reported in the text *The construction of the written language in children* and described by Bruna Campolmi (2001), of the Movement of Educational Cooperation of Florence, can help us to understand how the child, before starting school, has already elaborated its own personal knowledge about written language and the rules that govern it, confirming the presence of an *intuitive knowledge* that, according to Howard Gardner

(2005, p. 94), the child develops and elaborates, formulating theories able to offer an explanation of the world surrounding it, even if they are *naïve* so they need to be exposed, during the school period, to the consideration of a more founded critical-reflective thought.

This research, carried out using Piaget's method and that took adequately into consideration the original sociocultural level of children from four to six and a half years of age, explored their mental patterns, from which the conceptual stages about reading and writing that they elaborated before starting school emerged. Even if we know the limits of this research, it is interesting to report some of its results to underline that the child, when it starts school, has already acquired various competences, which the teacher can take into consideration and from which he can start a path of teaching-learning appropriate for the actual previous competences of the child.

At the age of five the child already seems to be able to distinguish the contents of the readings based on the *medium* used: in facts, they would be surprised if an adult would read a fairy tale on a newspaper. At the beginning, understanding that the reading is the direct verbal transmission of what is written on paper is not so obvious: according to the child, it is possible to write only concrete nouns and not articles, prepositions, etc. Regarding the nouns, he thinks that to report nouns which represent big objects many letters are needed while, on the contrary, nouns which represent small things require a few letters.

It seems then, in a certain stage of the evolutionary path, that the construction of the word can not have less than two letters. Finally, before the discovery of the phonetic system, at the age of five or six, the child experiences the syllabic phase, based on which every letter is represented by a syllable

The possibility of connecting didactic and methodological strategies to the child's knowledge and to their natural inclination autonomously build competences could help to overcome the difficult *meeting of the child with writing*. In this sense, the experiences led in class by the teacher Célestin Freinet (1973) are of comfort. Believing in the educational significance of the *experimental attempts* through which all children acquire, in a natural way, even very complex competences like speaking, walking or riding a bicycle, Freinet searches for the *techniques* through which the formal learning processes can register a continuity with the previous experience: the child can then approach subsequent learning, like reading and writing, with the same simplicity and spontaneity.

The quality that Freinet highlights with regards to the intentionality of the educational system is related to the context in which the relationships between child and adult take place, where the adult would have the task of supporting the child's experimental attempts, welcoming benevolently the functional and expressive aspect.

The experience of the child with writing occurs within a natural path starting from the first graphic expression (the scribble). This primary expression starts a path of experimentation and of confrontation with the effects of the graphic tool's action on the paper, that become more and more intentional and successful, also thanks to an increasing process of imitation of reality: this process takes as a reference the adult who, in the child's eye, communicates in a complex way and who, at the same time, is fascinating precisely because of the writing that he creates.

So the child makes some attempts to reproduce the writing, that don't replace the drawing, but combine with it, enrich and integrate it, rephrasing the experimental process of repeated attempts to perfect the gesture.

We are dealing with a path that can begin very early (around the age of three), but that continues during the whole kindergarten and primary school period, in the same way. The task of the teacher consists in keeping alive the interest in the written code, giving value to its communicative significance and linking it to children's life experiences: that's why it is very important to remember of not betraying the deweyan pedagogical assumption of "vital union with life" (Dewey, 1953, p. 58).

5. The harmonious connection between body and mind in the *shodō* (the way of calligraphy)

The complex act of learning to write entails, on one side, a close interaction between the action of the hand and specific neuro-motor, cognitive and perceptive-visual components and, on the other, as we have seen, a main recursive activity between creativity and pleasure (the pleasure of writing).

This last term induces us to recover the value of the body's experience and of the harmonious connection between the flow of the hand's and arm's movements and the surrounding life environment, from which can arise, if the educational context allows it, an active and sensorial involvement towards the graphic product, able to favour a surely more complete and functional communication.

It is no coincidence, indeed, if in certain cultures handwriting, supported and strengthened by a centuries-old philosophy, like in the Far East, is aesthetically declined and is appreciated as a veritable art form: in Japan it is called *shodō*, literally "the way of calligraphy", and it is considered a *medium* thanks to which body and mind find themselves united harmoniously. For Japanese people, even now, exercising in the ancient art form of calligraphy entails an attention, for us rather unusual, for the bodily dimension, which compels to assume a good posture and a correct breathing technique. At school, Japanese children must exercise, in addition to the normal learning of writing, also the art of calligraphy (which uses the same ideographic characters).

In the *shodō* the material used are the inkwell (*suzuri*), rice paper (*kami*) and the brush (*fude*), which can have different shapes and dimensions, but of which is important the quality of the tip, made of hard or soft bristles depending on the effect one intends to obtain: a neat line (hard bristles don't hold the ink) or a soft line (soft bristles hold the ink). The calligraphist sits at a low table, on his/her knees (in the position called *seiza*, a term that recalls the need to be "correctly seated"), with his/her back straight (but not stiff), in order to create a good condition of stability.

The specific use of hand and fingers, the handle of the brush, the relation with the sheet, imply a correct use of the entire body, that should never be in a state of stiffness: because of that it is required to relax the joints of wrist, elbow and shoulder, to make the intention of the graphic gesture flow instantly from the mind imaging it to the sheet on which it takes shape, passing through the *medium* of an elastic and flexible body.

In the western culture, although the word "calligraphy" (from the Greek *kalòs* and *graphia*) means "beautiful writing" (and by extension simply "writing"), we can't absolutely claim that the act of writing, in our culture, has any artistic implications². If once

² Except some avant-gardist and exclusive place of contemporary art, where the writing gesture is a possible

calligraphy was a discipline studied in schools (disappeared today), it was not taught nor used with artistic intentions, even if it preserved an aesthetic implication bound to the concept of “beautiful writing” and researched the beautiful shape.

Instead, *shodō* is first of all an art that is closely linked to painting, so much that “a good painter is first of all a good calligraphist, given that the learning of the two arts is simultaneous” (Nagayama 1993, p. 8), and so much that it has influenced other Japanese art forms, like for example *sumi-e*, a type of painting that, like *shodō*, uses Indian ink (*sumi*) and that consists in a monochromatic painting style, typical of the far east, aesthetically characterized by sobriety and spontaneity: black ink is used in different shades, which can be obtained by diluting it with water. If with the method of *sumi-e* the different lines of the artistic work draw a well discernible reality (for example a bamboo, a waterfall, a wave), the ones of the calligraphy are instead indistinct and informal patterns, not necessarily beautiful in the classic sense of the term, sometimes they can also evoke negative emotions, like fear and terror. The important thing is that they must be authentic and spontaneous aesthetic expressions of their author and the immediate reflex of the inner motion in the precise instant in which it emerges with all its natural energy.

In order not to fall in false beliefs and possible semantic confusion, we also need to point out that *shodō* is not only a writing technique with explicit aesthetic-artistic implications; it actually is a *practice of life* that makes use of the writing technique, to be intended as an inner research of the true. The final ideogram *dō*, which in Chinese corresponds to the term *tao* (research and comprehension of life), entails the idea of a way to go, a path of life to pursue, and finally a lifestyle concerning our whole existence: this character can be found at the end of many Japanese words connoting certain techniques or arts (for example *kendō* way of the sword; *judō*, way of kindness; *aikidō*, way of harmonious spirit, *kyudō*, way of archery), through the enhancement of which it is possible to achieve an equivalent psychophysical perfecting and then to self-fulfil, in the maslowian sense of the term.

Indeed, *shodō*, that originates from China and in particular from the Confucian culture, was considered by the latter equal to poetry and music, a true discipline which every man should exercise “in a study and an execution of the shapes that require, before every creative impulse, a strict control of the body and of the mind” (Pasqualotto, 2008, p. 98). Since in non-western cultures body and mind are considered and lived as two inseparable realities, in the process of construction of the writing is involved not only the ordered action of the body, but also the spirit of the shodoist, which is without fail vital and vibrating during the calligraphic experience, a vitality that remains impressed, makes the graphic patterns original and gives them a particular energetic vibration, as Nakabayashi Gochiku (1827-1913) says, reported by Noro Nagayama (2012, p. 89): *He who writes with the hand is inferior. / He who writes with the arm is superior. / But he can't be compared to he who writes with the heart.*

The calligraphist is called to master the constituent rules of writing, handling them at his best with an assiduous exercise constant in time, until the graphic expression emerges spontaneously, materializing in a simple, direct and immediate way: he must spontaneously control the graphic character “at the point that his hand, his arm, all of

instrument of artistic expression, that tends to imply different communicative purposes.

his being – mind, body and heart united together – can trace it without any more awareness, in a natural way, as if the image illustrated “was shaping itself” and so manage to “transform the learnt art in unlearnt art” (steve Gobesso, 2007, p. 142).

6. The possible revival of the “beautiful writing”: a utopia?

Considering the complexity of the process of the writing’s construction and the importance that such learning has for the individual since the earliest age, the problems raised so far allowed us to critically observe that:

a *pedagogy of the written gesture* could maybe contain the set of problems deriving from an unstoppable process of digitalization of the writing, that risks to extremely detach the individual from the “matter of writing”, making written communication more and more virtual³. We really need to wonder what will become of the graphic-creative impulse, given the massive tendency to replace handwriting with digital writing that, according to a catastrophist vision, could with time cloud the first until making it completely disappear.

Creativity is, according to a certain meaning, a way of living bound to the possibility of fulfilling one own existential potentials, both cognitive and bodily that, if experienced in an integrated way, entail sensations of pleasure and healthy psychophysical wellness.

Handwriting is a complex construction of the natural human creative activity, that begins with the scribble and whose exercise, especially in the developmental age, allows the activation and enhancement of important neurological, cognitive, perceptive-visual and motor functions which otherwise, if they are not adequately stimulated, could risk to become inactive and dull, with who knows which consequences in the individual and social field.

There is a close *continuity between the exercise of writing, the bodily-kinaesthetic activity and creativity*, a very lively continuity especially in certain socio-anthropological environments, like the far-eastern ones, where writing is intended not only as a fundamental individual and collective artistic expression, but also as an educational instrument aimed at improving one own existential condition.

The educational-pedagogical approaches that favour the teaching-learning of handwriting have always tried to answer – and now continue to do it with a greater conviction – to the need of supporting handwriting with the aim of facilitating the development of the child’s cognitive, emotional and motor dimensions. Unless this doesn’t become a pedagogical imperative to be structured in the educational contexts where educational praxis are carried out, it is difficult to see a disconcerting paradox decrease: children and, in general, young people of the new generations, are indeed very experienced in communicating digitally through *socials*, much more than they are with the manual instrument of writing, in front of which we have to wonder why, in an emerging way, always more cases of disability are recorded, that in the term *dysgraphia* (maybe misused today) find a weighty and worrying medical reference.

³It needs to be noted with a certain interest that some movement are rising, like “Digital Mindfulness”, that suggest the use of particular methods to make this ongoing transformation of social communication more livable (Subioli, 2017).

We can indeed affirm that a *new illiteracy*, simultaneous to the syntactic-grammatical one (but not less serious), can be recorded in the decreased executive-expressive abilities of the handwriting. Young people are becoming less and less able to write, and especially to write well, making the handwriting lose its main function, that of graphically communicate an own thought clearly and with natural elegance; also the secondary function of the handwriting, not less important, that of instrument (already *in fieri* present in the genetic makeup of humankind) to express oneself creatively within a wider process of integral formation, is lost.

Experts of the graphic sign, particularly worried about the possible end of this common good, strongly affirm that “handwriting is a source of wellness, pleasure, emotions, it is a vehicle of knowledge and a spring of culture; all qualities that make it a human heritage, conquest of irreplaceable value because promoter of human progress” (Garibaldi, 2016, p. 7).

It is true that the values bond to the learning of handwriting are many, but it is also true that at a collective level these values are less and less noticed and cared for: is it then utopian the foundation of a movement that supports the preservation of the learning methods of calligraphy in class, when by now the new technological tools prove indeed to be much more functional and easy to use than the anachronistic and complex handwriting?

Faced with this question of utopian character, but also very realistic, that could be read as an important tension of perspective for a not negligible pedagogic challenge, the time seems to have come for being called, with increasing conviction, not to lose but, actually, to strengthen the pedagogic coordinates of an education more and more aware of an essential treasure of humankind, certainly to keep alive and cleverly integrate to the by now as much essential digital form of written communication.

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